



Rehabilitation After Torture: *What Do We Do and Why is it Important?*

STARTTS CEO Jorge Aroche also presented at the panel event on International Day in Support of Victims of Torture. He spoke about how we rehabilitate and why it is so important.

Why rehabilitate?

We rehabilitate because it is the right and humane thing to do. Because it is the moral thing to do to reverse, to the extent that is possible, the damage perpetrated by morally corrupt people and systems. Because it is the compassionate thing to do whatever we can to help people reclaim their lives after surviving unspeakable man-made horrors. This should be enough to justify why rehabilitation is important, but there are many other reasons.

The right to compensation and rehabilitation

It is widely accepted that Article 14 of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment provides for the redress of victims of torture, including compensation and rehabilitation.

Christopher Keith Hall from Amnesty International states that, in addition to the justice remedies contained in Article 13, “Article 14 of the Convention, which contains no geographic restriction, requires each state party to ensure in its legal system that any victim of an act of torture, regardless of where it occurred, obtains redress and has an enforceable right to fair and adequate compensation, including the means for as full rehabilitation as possible”.

The host nation’s interest in ensuring survivors regain their ability to contribute to society

These are compelling reasons. But they come largely from the victim’s side, and rely on a pre-supposition that we are driven in our actions by lofty ideals. True for all of us, but it is not universally the case.

The other compelling reason for rehabilitation is that it is good for our society and good for our economy.

Once we accept the responsibility of providing protection through resettlement, it becomes obvious, even to the most ardent economic rationalist, that it is far better to invest in people’s rehabilitation so that they

are able to regain their capacity to contribute to society, both socially and economically, rather than becoming reliant on the state on a permanent basis.

Prevention in terms of the cycle of perpetration of torture

Last but not least, I believe, based on my observations and discussion with colleagues working in many post-conflict countries over the years, that failure to invest in rehabilitation at both individual and societal levels, can contribute to the entrenchment of torture as an accepted practice, and to the perpetuation of cycles of repression and torture in those societies, both as a manifestation of latent pathology and engrained systemic practices.

How does torture damage people?

How does torture work?

Torture does so much damage that it is difficult to summarise its effect in a few sentences. It works largely by creating situations of extreme power imbalance, fear, humiliation and often extreme pain and discomfort.

In its most sophisticated iterations it relies on the precise study of individual attributes and the careful manipulation of environmental variables to undermine the individual’s ability to self-regulate their emotions. The interpersonal nature of the trauma undermines basic beliefs about humanity, trust and our worth and place in the world.

At a societal level, it is the ultimate tool of social control, and affects systemic relationships at all levels, from the family to civic society.

The bio-psycho-social impact of torture

At STARTTS we use what we call a bio-psycho-social model to understand the impact of torture. Basically, it means that torture affects the physical body, especially the nervous system and particularly the brain. It also affects the mind, in terms of how we perceive ourselves and the world around us, and how we organize these

perceptions, and of course, it affects our relations with other people, both as individuals and within social systems.

The impact of torture on the brain and the nervous system

We could talk for days about how torture and trauma affect the brain, but let me summarise this by saying that the extreme fear and trauma combined with both the deliberate and incidental deregulation of the nervous system can, in many individuals, result in long-lasting effects, which include both physiological and structural changes in the brain. In addition, because our brain is plastic and changeable, our brain adapts to help us survive life in horrific circumstances, and some of these adaptations and survival strategies can be problematic in a more normal environment.

Torture can also affect how we use and organize our brain. In other words, to use a crude analogy, it can affect both our hardware and software. Like in most things, the magnitude of the consequences of trauma is a product of the interaction of both environmental and genetic factors.

The most common sequelae of torture at individual, family and community levels

What does this mean? Many different things. Amongst the most common problems are sleep problems, hyper alertness, recurring memories of the traumatic event, nightmares, concentration problems, irritability, dissociation, anxiety, depression and many others.

Many of our clients talk about feeling in danger all the time, unable to trust or rely on others, and this plays havoc with their family life and their relationships with people around them. All in all, these issues combined with other difficulties that are part and parcel of commencing life in a new environment create quite powerful cocktails.

How do we assist torture survivors to rehabilitate?

We rely on people's strengths and capacity for self healing

The first axiom is that we see our job not as curing people from the effects of torture, but as helping them marshal their strengths in order to heal themselves. This may involve "treating" some particular issues that impede their recovery, but rehabilitation is a lot more. Rehabilitation is about empowerment, about reclaiming their life back from the torturers, about regaining

control of their lives. Thus, we always work in partnership with our clients, and often, also with other helping professions. Reclaiming health and mental health is only one aspect of it, albeit a crucial one.

A bio-psycho-social approach

This approach is very useful to describe a model for healing. If the brain is working in a way that makes daily life difficult, we need to address this problem in order to make healing possible. This is the "bio" aspect of the healing process. Similarly, if the torture experience has changed the way we perceive and interpret the world, rehabilitation means finding ways to process traumatic memories and re-interpret these experiences so that they can be reconciled with a notion of a "safe enough" world. This is the "psycho" aspect of the healing process.

Assisting the individual and shaping their healing environment

Often this also means working to make the other crucial ingredient, the healing environment, as conducive as possible to rehabilitation, and assisting our clients to rebuild a good social support system around them. This is the "social".

Informed eclecticism guided by science and experience

How do we do this? The short and uninformative answer is, any way we can... In slightly more technical terms, I like to think of STARTTS as practising an eclectic approach that combines the benefits of various therapeutic approaches informed by experience, empirical research and, increasingly, the latest developments in neuroscience.

We work with complex problems and to unravel them we need a diverse array of tools. The challenge is often to know what tool to use when. We are learning all the time, and the last few years have been incredibly exciting in terms of the new tools that have become available to help us undo the damage caused by torture.

The much misunderstood and mystified role of culture

Last but not least, if therapy is a partnership, it will not be very productive unless our work makes sense and somehow fits with the worldview of our partners. Hence the necessity for us to make every effort to understand the worldview of our clients, and to make sure we package and adapt what we learn through research, neuroscience and clinical experience with other groups, so that it becomes congruent with their cultural attributes and belief system, but without allowing them to become a barrier. R

Policing the Gap: How Blacktown Police Won Over the Community

Blacktown is home to people from many cultures. The Police and the community have worked closely together to create harmony and understanding, as LIN TAYLOR explains.

What's happening in Blacktown is bit of a mystery. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics nearly 32 per cent of people living in Blacktown have a non-English speaking background, and 19 per cent have arrived in Australia in the last five years, yet this western Sydney suburb should, in theory, be a lot more problematic than it is.

Even with nearly 200 cultural groups represented, Superintendent Mark Wright from Blacktown Local Command says the area is more harmonious than it has ever been.

"We now have about 180 different cultural groups in Blacktown, but we don't have a dominant culture which I think is a real strength.

"When was the last time you've heard of a cultural issue or cultural divide within the community of Blacktown? You know, there hasn't been one," he says.

But it was not that long ago when serious tensions simmered between police and South Sudanese youth. "There was a sudden influx of South Sudanese in Blacktown and there were a lot of young men hanging

around," says STARTTS Community Services Coordinator, Jasmina Bajraktarevic-Hayward.

While shopkeepers felt intimidated by their presence, the young people on the other hand claimed they were being unfairly targeted whenever police or security staff approached them.

"Young people get targeted anyway and when they stand out, like the South Sudanese do, people experience fear. Even when there's no justification for that fear," says Bajraktarevic-Hayward.

Fear and a distrust of authority were also apparent in the South Sudanese community, leading to widespread misunderstanding arising from both the police and the community.

"Coming from a war-torn situation, we don't trust police. No-one trusts the police," says South Sudanese community elder Ajang Biar. "What was happening was the misunderstanding of police with the Sudanese culture."

Being together in large groups is the way Sudanese people socialise, he adds. They will see each other on the street and stop to chat.

"We are a connected community," Biar says. "But to